

## Social Protection as an Approach to Addressing Poverty Among Women Domestic Workers in Zambia

### Background

Social security is a human right to which everyone should have access. Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), states that “everyone has the right to social security” (right to medical care, social services, security in the event of sickness, disability, maternity, widowhood, old age and unemployment). Article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also recognizes “the right of everyone to social security” (Reichter, 2003).

Zambia has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Moreover, Zambia has undertaken initiatives (such as the Minimum Wages and Conditions of Employment Order 2011) that guarantee informal economy workers (including domestic workers) rights such as decent work for equal pay, paid annual leave, sick leave, maternity leave and separation package (Global Network, 2011; Chanda, 2014). However, due to the invisibility of domestic work and low levels of literacy among workers there are rampant cases of non-compliance by employers. To that end, domestic workers work long hours (as they exceed eight hours each day of work) with little pay, and usually have no maternity leave, health care, or pension benefits. More so, they do not have sick leave, disability insurance, unemployment insurance, old age benefits, and job security as one can be fired without notice and no benefits at all. Consequently, women domestic workers face various challenges such as poverty, social exclusion, discrimination,

human rights abuses, economic and social injustice, including deficits in legal rights and social security protection.

This study thus sought to establish the impact of social protection on poverty and vulnerability among women domestic workers in Zambia. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What is the impact of domestic work on poverty among women domestic workers?
- What is the impact of social protection on women domestic workers' socio-economic empowerment?
- What measures should the Zambian government put in place to promote gender-sensitive social protection for informal sector women domestic workers?

The study was imperative as it would contribute to the existing body of knowledge on social protection and poverty reduction. More so, the awareness is expected to motivate further studies into the phenomenon.



**Patrick Chanda**

University of Zambia,  
Department of Social Work  
and Sociology

email: [patrick.chanda@unza.zm](mailto:patrick.chanda@unza.zm);  
[patrickchanda@gmail.com](mailto:patrickchanda@gmail.com)

In 2015, SASPEN and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Zambia hosted a high level **international expert conference on Sustainability of Social Protection in Johannesburg, South Africa, Oct 20-21.**

All Conference Proceedings including this brief are available at:  
<http://www.saspens.org/home/en/conferences/sustainability-of-social-protection-international-conference-2015>

## Research Methodology

The study employed an exploratory qualitative design in order to get an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon under study. According to Key (1997), qualitative research produces more in-depth information from the people's own point of view and lived experiences.

The catchment area was Lusaka city because it is the capital city where there are numerous private homes in low density areas where women from townships (high density areas or overcrowded places) are employed as domestic workers in order to earn a living.

15 women domestic workers and five key informants were recruited for the study. This sample size was easy to manage in terms of data collection and analysis. Qualitative research is concerned with smaller sample sizes as it makes it easier for researchers to collect in-depth information (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007).

Research participants were purposively sampled because the researcher intended to get insightful information on the impact of social protection on pov-

erty among women domestic workers. Marshall (1996) asserts that purposive sampling is used to study a broad range of subjects who have specific experiences or special expertise. Snowball sampling was also employed because female domestic workers were very difficult to locate. This type of sampling involves consultation with individual participants or subjects who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others (Bryman, 2008).

The weakness with this sampling method is that the researcher had difficulties in accessing the participants in private homes since women domestic workers were not easily traced. Therefore, gatekeepers helped in identifying primary participants. The first women contacted recommended others who they knew as being in a situation similar to theirs.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect data from women domestic workers and key informants. This method allowed the researcher to ask open-ended questions, probe and

ask follow-up questions in order to solicit for in-depth information from respondents. One focus group meeting comprising six women domestic workers was held during the study. The focus group meeting enabled the researcher to get divergent views of women with regard to the impact of social protection on poverty among women domestic workers in Zambia.

Thematic analysis was used in order to extract categories of data with similar meaning. The data were coded into conceptual categories. These categories of data with similar meaning generated themes that were used to interpret data based on research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) affirm that thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.

Confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, harm/risks and informed consent were considered. Such ethical issues as well as the consequences for the interviewee should be taken into account with any qualitative interview (Kvale, 1996).

## Discussion of Results

### Impact of Unregulated Domestic Work on Poverty among Women Domestic Workers

The results indicate that unregulated and unsecure domestic employment perpetuates poverty because it deprives women of lifelong skills, schooling and employment opportunities which they can use to move out of poverty and

become socially and economically empowered. To that effect, domestic work limits women's freedoms, that is, opportunities, choices, privileges, and the full development of their capabilities which they can use to realize their future aspirations.

The implications of domestic work for women's rights and welfare is that women are subjected to poor terms of employment and working conditions which deny them the right to decent work, equal pay and socio-economic security. Hence, women domestic workers are trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty as they are sometimes underpaid or not paid at all. In this regard, insecure domestic employment is a violation of women's right to adequate standard of living as they struggle to earn a living. This is because women domestic workers do not have enough monthly income to afford a minimum standard of food and nutrition, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services.

More so, they usually do not have paid sick leave, maternity leave, pension benefits or separation package, and health care. Therefore, informal domestic work perpetuates socio-economic inequalities and injustices among women. This in turn results in women becoming vulnerable to various forms of abuse (including human rights abuses and gender-based violence), discrimination, marginalization and oppression in society.

Even though unregulated and insecure domestic work exacerbates feminization of poverty, it also enables women and their families to fight household poverty as they are able to earn money to make ends meet. Therefore, domestic employment acts as a buffer for poverty reduction for poor households in high density areas of Lusaka City from where women domestic workers are recruited. To that end, domestic work is in some cases inevitable despite the vulnerabilities that it creates.



## Impact of Social Protection on Women Domestic Workers' Socio-Economic Empowerment

Findings of the study show that provision of social protection schemes would help in addressing feminization of poverty by including women domestic workers in education and vocational training programmes that would help them acquire better-lifelong skills and enhance employment opportunities. That is, provision of social protection schemes on education and vocational training would promote women domestic workers' freedoms, opportunities, choices, privileges, and the full development of their capabilities which they can use to enter the formal labour market and find better paid jobs with sustained income. This therefore would address inequalities and socio-economic injustices among women. To that effect, women would realize their future aspirations and be free from various forms of abuse, discrimination, marginalization and oppression in society.

Results also indicate that social insurance schemes such as unemployment benefits, old age benefits, pension provisions and minimum wage would sustain income and promote financial security among women domestic workers. This

would in turn help in addressing inequalities (gender, social and economic), vulnerabilities and break the cycle of poverty among women domestic workers. Thus, employment based-social protection schemes (based on shared contributions from employers and employees) are vital in addressing socio-economic injustice and income insecurity among women domestic workers. This would in turn enhance social and economic empowerment for women domestic workers as they would become independent and self-reliant.

Moreover, the provision of health insurance for domestic workers would promote health care, address health shocks and reduce vulnerability during sickness and child-bearing. Access to good nutrition by women domestic workers who are child-bearing would address gender related vulnerabilities and fight the cycle of poverty among women and their families. More so, access to savings, disability insurance and health insurance schemes would give women access to health care services in case of illness or accident at work. Additionally, paid sick leave and maternity leave would improve maternity and other reproductive health services, and promote income and job security for women domestic workers.

## Measures that would Promote Gender-Sensitive Social Protection for Informal Sector Women Domestic Workers

Results indicate that the Zambian government should scale up existing education programmes and policies that are aimed at addressing child labour, abuse and economic exploitation that would perpetuate poverty and vulnerability. Social protection programmes should ensure that women and girls have access to early education programmes, primary and secondary school education, and vocational training or entrepreneur skills training in various fields such as construction, agriculture, etc. More so, the government should enforce already existing labour laws and policies (wage and income policies) that should promote domestic workers' access to health services, savings, disability insurance, maternity and other reproductive health services.

## Conclusion

It is established from the results that domestic work exacerbates feminization of poverty because it deprives many women of the right to education which is the key to enjoyment of other rights. Therefore, the provision of social protection schemes such as education and vocational training would promote women domestic workers' freedoms, that is, opportunities, choices, privileges, and the full development of their capabilities which they can use to realize their future aspirations. This would in turn help these women to move out of poverty and have sustained livelihoods.

The findings of the study could not be generalised to the general population of domestic workers and other contexts because the design used a small sample size. The sample size was small because qualitative research is concerned with in-depth information and not making gen-

eralisable hypothethis statements about the phenomena under investigation. However, the findings of this study are likely to be applicable to many domestic workers (including female domestic workers in general).

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## About SASPEN

The Southern African Social Protection Experts Network, SASPEN, is a not-for-profit loose alliance of stakeholders, scholars and consultants who engage with social protection in the SADC region. It promotes the fostering, expansion and improvement of social protection in SADC countries and engages in dissemination and sensitisation by providing platforms for exchange regarding social protection programmes, frameworks, research and consultancies and by creating network structures to link participants with each other and to relevant institutions. Activities of the network may include country workshops, international conferences, seminars, publications, joint research, dissemination of information.

The network aims to provide a basis for (i) sharing of experience and information based on research and in-depth knowledge of social protection issues, (ii) constructive debate, discourse, discussion and reflection among experts and with stakeholders and role-players, and (iii) rendering a range of services to support the promotion, development and implementation of social protection in SADC countries, with reference also to strengthening social protection floor initiatives – on a commissioned, requested or self-initiated basis.

The exchange and interaction within the network is guided by the principles of independence of individual participants, collaboration in network activities,

professionalism and objectivity. The network is not membership-based. There are two modes of possible involvement by individuals and institutions in the network, affiliation and registration. Both modes require participants to create a user account in the web-based network platform [www.saspen.org/network](http://www.saspen.org/network). By so doing, participants become affiliates and are subscribed to the network's emailing list. Those who furthermore express willingness for active participation in network activities by filling out an expert profile qualify for the status of registered network participant. Registered participants make themselves visible to other registered network participants and in turn receive access to their profiles. They may thus also be visible to third party institutions in search of expertise or services.

Participation in the network is free and carries no responsibilities or financial rewards or entitlements. No contractual arrangements involving network participants (or facilitated through platforms provided by the network) will include the network but will be subject to individual parties who may link and/or engage through the network.

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**Southern African  
Social Protection Experts  
Network – SASPEN**

Lusaka, P.O. Box 30554, Zambia  
[info@saspen.org](mailto:info@saspen.org)  
[www.saspen.org](http://www.saspen.org)  
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